FILM MAKING IN NEW ZEALAND

a brief historical survey

Clive Sowry

Cover: Jack Welsh on location DOWN ON THE FARM (1935)

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The New Zealand Film Archive was established in March 1981 to acquire, preserve and make permanently available a national collection of film and television materials. The Archive is to moving images what art galleries and museums are to artefacts and paintings, and libraries to rare manuscripts and books: a guardian of national works of cultural value placed in its trust, a show place, dissemination centre and study resource.

The New Zealand Film Archive
PO Box 9544 Wellington NZ

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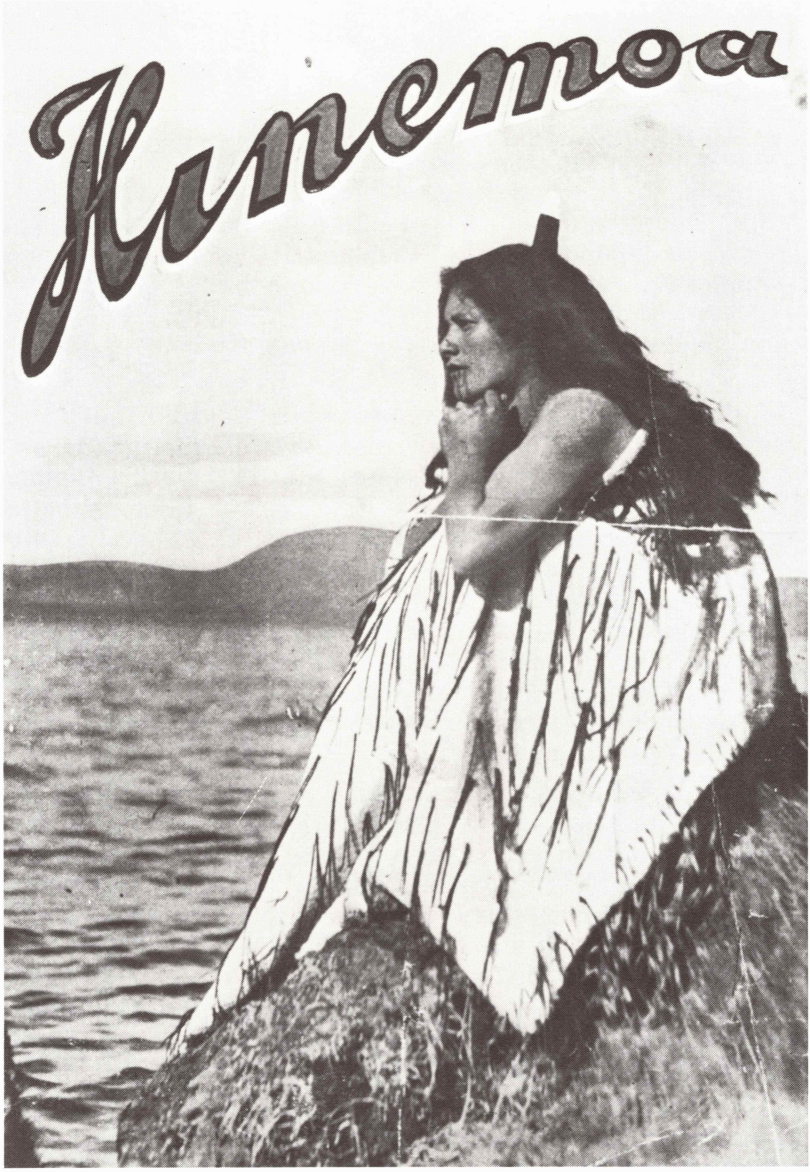
Pioneers

Moving pictures were first shown in New Zealand in 1896, but it was not until two years later that any were actually produced. In 1898, an itinerant showman from Auckland, A H Whitehouse, imported a camera and shot a number of short topical films: **The Opening of the Auckland Exhibition** and **Uhlan Winning the Auckland Cup** were among the first of these. By mid-1900 Whitehouse had shot ten such films and took them to show at the Paris Exhibition. On his return Whitehouse again took up film exhibition but did not produce any more.

Among the pioneer cameramen who followed Whitehouse were Joseph Perry of the Salvation Army's Limelight Department, T J West of West's Pictures, and W Franklyn Barrett. Perry was commissioned by the New Zealand Government to make a film record of the Royal Visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York in 1901. Later during his tours with the Biorama Company, Perry shot and exhibited many scenic films and filmed the turn-out of many fire brigades. The 1901 Royal Visit was also filmed by Barrett, who later produced the first short dramatic films in New Zealand. The local films West shot to supplement his programmes were less often of scenery than of well-peopled street scenes.

In 1914 George Tarr produced a 2,500 ft film, **Hinemoa**, based on the Maori legend. The film was distributed throughout New Zealand by Hayward's Pictures and Tarr accompanied the film as lecturer. Tarr's cameraman for this film was Charles Newham, at that time the most experienced film maker in New Zealand. He took up full-time film making in 1910, initially filming around Wanganui and later extending his activities to Auckland. In 1916, also in Auckland, Rawdon Blandford produced and starred in **The Test**, a four-reel feature drama based on **The Ballad of Stuttering Jim** by William Satchell.

The few film makers working in New Zealand before 1920 concentrated on shooting news films for local theatres or scenic and industrial films for more general release. Very few dramatic films were made and the only regular production came from the newsreel cameramen supplying the cinema chains.



Hera Tawhai in George Tarr's HINEMOA (1914)

Rudall Hayward

The name Rudall Hayward is synonymous with New Zealand film making in the 1920's and 1930's. During this time he produced six features and a large number of one and two reel comedies, industrials and news films. His first feature, **My Lady of the Cave** (1922) was based on a popular serial story published in a weekly newspaper. This was followed by **Rewi's Last Stand** (1925), a drama-romance set at the time of a famous incident in the Maori Wars. Later Hayward rewrote the script and re-made the film in sound. This second version of **Rewi's Last Stand** was released in 1940.

Hayward's other features included an historical drama, **The Te Kooti Trail** (1927), and two contemporary dramas, **The Bush Cinderella** (1928) and **On the Friendly Road** (1936). Despite small budgets, few of Hayward's features returned any profit from local distribution. Nevertheless, Hayward persevered, devoting all his energy to producing distinctly New Zealand films. During the late 1920's Hayward made ends meet by travelling from town to town with a stock script making two-reel "community comedies" such as **Tilly of Te Aroha** and **A Daughter of Dunedin.** Hayward's film making career spanned more than fifty years. He died in 1974 while promoting his last feature **To Love a Maori** (1972).

On Location

The first foreign producer to use New Zealand as a location for dramatic films was Gaston Méliès, who brought his company from America in 1912 and made two one-reel films, **Hinemoa** and **How Chief Te Ponga Won His Bride**, and a two-reeler, **Loved by a Maori Chieftess**, all of which featured a cast of Maoris.

Three years later, Australian producer Raymond Longford came to New Zealand to shoot **A Maori Maid's Love**. He visited New Zealand again in 1916 to film scenes for **The Mutiny of the Bounty**. New Zealand locations were also used by another Australian producer, Beaumont Smith, in his features **The Betrayer** (1921) and **The Adventures of Algy** (1925).

In 1925 Gustav Pauli came to New Zealand to make two features for an English company, Sphere Films. These films, **Under the Southern Cross** and **The Romance of Hine-Moa** were completed in 1926, the latter being distributed throughout the world by Gaumont.

In 1928, Universal Films of Hollywood sent Alexander Markey to New Zealand to shoot **Taranga**. During filming Markey was recalled to America because of unsatisfactory progress. The film was completed by Markey's assistant, Lew Collins, and was released in 1929 as **Under the Southern Cross** (in America it was released with a synchronised score as **The Devil's Pit**). Markey returned to New Zealand in 1930 to produce **Hei Tiki** with local finance. This film was completed in America where it was released in 1935.

Witarina Mitchell (right) in UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS/THE DEVIL'S PIT (1929)

Edwin Coubray (camera left), Frank Stewart (camera right), Stella Southern and Harrington Reynolds (right) THE BIRTH OF NEW ZEALAND (1922)

The Twenties

Two local features of the early twenties made use of imported talent. Australians Stella Southern and John Faulkner starred in the historical epic **The Birth of New Zealand** (1922), which was directed by another Australian Harrington Reynolds. **Venus of the South Seas** (1924), which was filmed mainly in the Nelson district, featured Australian swimmer and Hollywood star Annette Kellerman, whose name was still sufficiently well known to ensure world-wide release of the film.

A less ambitious feature was Henry Makepeace's **The Romance of Sleepy Hollow**, which used an amateur cast and obtained a limited release in Auckland in 1924.

The only continuity of film production was in the making of short films — scenics and industrials, beauty contests and screen tests (the latter sometimes in the form of a local melodrama), and local news films made by exhibitors.

One of the few full-time film makers of this period was Edwin Coubray whose company, New Zealand Radio Films Ltd, specialised in sponsored industrial films. For Moa Films Ltd, Coubray wrote and produced a feature drama with a horse racing theme, **Carbine's Heritage** (1927), which screened simultaneously at three Auckland theatres on its successful initial release.

NZ Radio Films Ltd Coubray-tone sound truck shooting Bishop Cleary's funeral Auckland 1929 (Cameramen Fred and Ted Coubray)

Talkies

When talkies arrived in 1929 local film makers were quick to adapt to the new medium. Edwin Coubray was the first New Zealander to achieve sound-on-film talkies. Late in 1929 he produced the **Coubray-tone News** using sound recording equipment of his own design. In Dunedin, Jack Welsh and James Gault perfected a variable-density sound-on-film system and produced a few talkie shorts. By 1933 Welsh was producing a weekly talkie newsreel **New Zealand Soundscenes** which ran for six months. However it was not until 1935 that New Zealand's first talkie feature appeared, **Down on the Farm**, produced by Stewart Pitt and Lee Hill, with sound recording by Jack Welsh. Hill and Welsh cooperated on two further talkie features **The Wagon and the Star** and **Phar Lap's Son?** (both 1936). All three features were shot in the Otago-Southland region.

Government Films

James McDonald of the Tourist Department began making scenic films as a part-time activity in 1907. The filming of scenic attractions was later taken over by photographers of the Agriculture Department until the transfer of the photographic section to the Government Publicity Office in 1922. Early in 1923 the Publicity Office employed a full-time film cameraman to make scenic films for local and overseas tourist promotion. By 1926 the Office was producing one reel a week for release by M-G-M. While most of these films followed a standard formula, a few, such as **In Days of Gold** and **City of Wheels**, were novel and imaginative in their treatment of previously filmed subjects. Two of the Publicity Office scenics were feature-length: **Glorious New Zealand** (1925) and **Romantic New Zealand** (1934). The latter was made in conjunction with Filmcraft Ltd whose studios and laboratory at Miramar were used by the Government film makers from 1928. In 1936 the Government acquired the Filmcraft studios and production of tourist and information films was stepped up. The most ambitious undertaking of the Government Film Studios was the production of a fifty-minute featurette to mark the country's centenary, **One Hundred Crowded Years.**

The sound stage at the Government Film Studios, Miramar (1941)

The National Film Unit

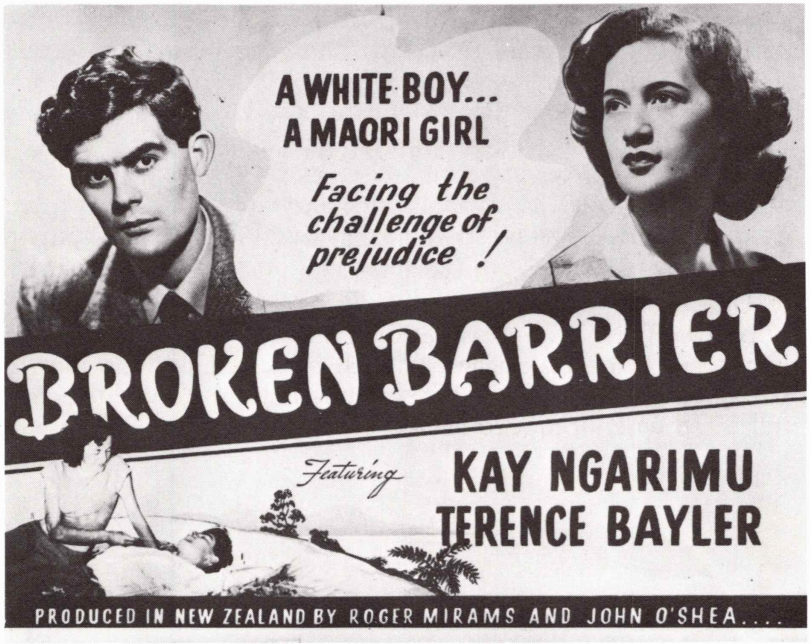
With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 the demand for publicity films ceased and it was intended that the Government Film Studios should close. However, recognising the value of film for wartime information and propaganda, a Film Production Sub-Committee was established under the Director of Publicity to co-ordinate the production of a series of anti-waste films. In 1941 the Studios were reorganised as the National Film Unit and production of a weekly war information reel began. This reel was later called **Weekly Review** and its "marching men" title became a familiar sight in New Zealand picture theatres during the war.

At the end of the war the style of the **Weekly Review** changed and the reel often concentrated on a single topic in documentary style. **The Railway Worker** (Weekly Review No 355) and **The Coaster** (Weekly Review No 374) were examples of this trend. In the late 1940's the Unit began producing other films in addition to the Review, the most ambitious being **Journey for Three**, a dramatised documentary featurette commissioned by the Immigration Department. Production of tourist promotional films, many of which were in colour, also commenced about this time.

Following the change of Government in 1949, production of the **Weekly Review** was stopped for alleged political bias. Information films continued to be produced for government departments and in 1952 a monthly magazine, **Pictorial Parade**, appeared for the first time. The Parade series continued as the Unit's staple output for twenty years. In the early 1970's the Unit scored a popular success with its three-screen film for Expo 70, **This Is New Zealand**, and developed a greater diversity with the production of such films as **Gone Up North For A While** (1972). The Unit continued at the Miramar studios until 1978 when it moved to new studios in Lower Hutt.

Pacific Films

In the period 1940 to 1970 only three New Zealand feature films were produced. All were made by Pacific Films Ltd, a Wellington company formed in 1948 by Roger Mirams and Alun Falconer. Falconer's association with the company was short-lived and Mirams was later joined by John O'Shea. Together they produced a feature with a race relations theme, **Broken Barrier**, which was released in 1952. Mirams left for Australia in 1956 following the introduction of television there. O'Shea carried on, and in 1964 produced **Runaway**, which he followed in 1966 with **Don't Let It Get You** but as neither film returned its costs, plans for further features were shelved. Pacific and other companies, by the regular production of documentaries and television commercials, kept the independent film industry alive.



BROKEN BARRIER (1952)

Television

The commencement of regular television broadcasts in 1960 brought about a continual demand for local television commercials from independent film producers who were occasionally commissioned to produce documentaries. But the majority of local productions, consisting of news and current affairs programmes, were filmed by staff of the television stations. The introduction of a second, alternative, television channel in 1975 boosted local content substantially but offered even fewer opportunities to independent producers.

New Life

Observing the revival of the Australian cinema in the early 1970's a few producers turned their attention to the production of feature films. The successful release of **Off The Edge** and the publicity surrounding the production of **Wild Man**, **Sleeping Dogs**, and **Solo** greatly supported the attempts of local film makers to obtain government assistance for their industry. Convinced of the need to maintain the momentum of this activity, the Government established an Interim Film Commission in October 1977. The New Zealand Film Commission was established by Act of Parliament the following year. The principal function of the Commission is "To encourage and also to participate and assist in the making, promotion, distribution, and exhibition of films". The success of the Commission is evident in the increase in feature film production in New Zealand, and in the favourable reaction to these films both in New Zealand and overseas.

Geoff Murphy's UTU (1983)

Fiona Kay in Vincent Ward's VIGIL (1984)

Filmography:
NZ Fiction Features

Silent:

1914 *HINEMOA George Tarr
1916 *THE TEST Rawdon Blandford
1922 **THE BIRTH OF NEW ZEALAND Harrington Reynolds
**MY LADY OF THE CAVE Rudall Hayward
1924 VENUS OF THE SOUTH SEAS James Sullivan (1)
*THE ROMANCE OF SLEEPY HOLLOW Henry Makepeace
1925 **REWI'S LAST STAND Rudall Hayward
1927 *CARBINE'S HERITAGE Edwin Coubray
THE TE KOOTI TRAIL Rudall Hayward
1928 THE BUSH CINDERELLA Rudall Hayward

Sound:

1935 **DOWN ON THE FARM Lee Hill, Stewart Pitt
HEI TIKI Alexander Markey (2)
1936 *PHAR LAP'S SON? A L Lewis
*THE WAGON AND THE STAR J J W Pollard
ON THE FRIENDLY ROAD Rudall Hayward (NZ FilmGuild)
1940 **REWI'S LAST STAND Rudall Hayward (3)
1952 BROKEN BARRIER Roger Mirams, John O'Shea
1964 RUNAWAY John O'Shea
1966 DON'T LET IT GET YOU John O'Shea
1972 TO LOVE A MAORI Rudall Hayward
1975 TEST PICTURES Hinge Film Productions
LANDFALL Paul Maunder (4)
1977 WILD MAN Geoff Murphy
SLEEPING DOGS Roger Donaldson
1978 ANGEL MINE David Blythe
1979 SKIN DEEP Geoff Steven
MIDDLE AGE SPREAD John Reid
SONS FOR THE RETURN HOME Paul Maunder
1980 SQUEEZE Richard Turner
BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT John Laing
1981 GOODBYE PORK PIE Geoff Murphy
PICTURES Michael Black (5)
1982 SMASH PALACE Roger Donaldson
THE SCARECROW Sam Pillsbury
BATTLETRUCK Harley Cokliss
CARRY ME BACK John Reid
1983 UTU Geoff Murphy
STRATA Geoff Steven
SAVAGE ISLANDS Ferdinand Fairfax

Co-productions:

1978 SOLO Tony Williams (Australia)
1981 BAD BLOOD Mike Newell (UK)
RACE FOR THE YANKEE ZEPHYR David Hemmings (Australia)
DEAD KIDS/STRANGE BEHAVIOUR Michael Laughlin (Australia/USA)
1982 PRISONERS Peter Werner (USA) (6)
1983 MERRY CHRISTMAS MR LAWRENCE Nagisa Oshima (Japan/UK)

Overseas Features Made Partly on Location in NZ:

1916 *A MAORI MAID'S LOVE Raymond Longford (Australia)
*THE MUTINY OF THE BOUNTY Raymond Longford (Australia)
1921 *THE BETRAYER Beaumont Smith (Australia)
1925 THE ADVENTURES OF ALGY Beaumont Smith (Australia)
1927 **THE ROMANCE OF HINE-MOA Gustav Pauli (UK)
UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS Gustav Pauli (UK)
1929 UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS/THE DEVIL'S PIT Lew Collins (USA)
1954 THE SEEKERS Ken Annakin (UK)
1957 UNTIL THEY SAIL Robert Wise (USA)
1973 RANGI'S CATCH Michael Forlong (UK)
1982 BROTHERS Terry Bourke (Australia)

1984 New, Unreleased or Forthcoming:

WILD HORSES Derek Morton, THE LOST TRIBE John Laing, AMONG THE CINDERS Rolf Haedrich, TRESPASSES Peter Sharp, CONSTANCE Bruce Morrison, LIZZIE David Blythe, THE SILENT ONE Yvonne Mackay, VIGIL Vincent Ward, TRIAL RUN Melanie Read, HEART OF THE STAG Michael Firth, PALLET ON THE FLOOR Lynton Butler, DEATH WARMED UP David Blythe, CAME A HOT FRIDAY Ian Mune.

Except for co-productions and overseas features the date is for the year of NZ release unless otherwise noted.

* Indicates film is lost.
** Incomplete: has major gaps, several reels missing, or exists only in fragments.
(1) Production 1922/23.
(2) In production 1930, released New York 1935, released NZ 1939.
(3) In production 1937. Film survives in its reduced British release version — THE LAST STAND.
(4) Production 1974 by NFU for NZBC. Screened Abu Shiraz Festival Iran 1975 (Gold Prize), Wellington and Auckland Film Festivals 1977.
(5) Overseas Festival screenings 1981, London release 1982, NZ release 1983.
(6) Production date, unreleased.

A Few Facts

First Public Screening of Motion Pictures in New Zealand:

Tuesday October 13 1896, at the Opera House, Auckland. Professors Hausmann and Gow introduced Edison's Kinematograph as an item in the programme of Godfrey's Vaudeville Company.

The first public screening of motion pictures in Wellington was given on Wednesday October 28 1896, at the Exchange Hall. The exhibitor was J F MacMahon.

The first public screening of motion pictures in Christchurch was given by J F McMahon on Saturday November 7 1896 at the "Cinematographe Salon", High Street.

The first public screening of motion pictures in Dunedin was given by J F MacMahon on Friday November 20 1896 at the "Salon Cinematographe", Princes Street.

First Film Taken in New Zealand:

The Opening of the Auckland Exhibition. Filmed by A H Whitehouse on December 1 1898.

First Feature Film made in New Zealand:

Hinemoa produced by George Tarr and photographed by Charles Newham. First screened at the Lyric Theatre Auckland on August 17 1914.

First Programme of "Talkies":

Screened at the Paramount Theatre Wellington, on Friday March 8 1929. The feature film **Street Angel** starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, was screened with a supporting programme of five talkie shorts.

First "Talking Pictures" taken in New Zealand:

Filmed by Edwin Coubray of New Zealand Radio Films Ltd in 1929. The first New Zealand "talkie" to be screened publicly was the **Coubray-tone News**, which was screened at the Plaza Theatre Auckland on January 3 1930.

First "Talkie" Feature Film made in New Zealand:

Down on the Farm, produced by Lee Hill and Stewart Pitt. Sound-track recorded by the Welsh Sound System designed and built by Jack Welsh of Dunedin. It had its premiere at the Empire De Luxe Theatre Dunedin on May 2 1935.

THE BIRTH OF NEW ZEALAND (1922) in 1981

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